CHAPTER TWO

THE SECULAR PRINCIPLE—A GUIDING COMPASS

As secular democracies attempt to find appropriate pathways and management strategies for religion in public policy, the most significant idea for consideration is the secular principle. The idea relies on state governance, inclusive democratic processes and policies, and equitable access. In the secular model, the state is thought and seen to be theologically neutral. The following sections ‘The secular principle’ and ‘Two streams of secularism’ explore the origin and development of the secular idea.1

The Secular Principle

The secular idea is politically potent. It has been variously applied throughout history to emphasise different theological, philosophical, and social trends. In this way, it has become complex, but it is not so fluid that it has dissolved its etymological (word origin) associations. The meaning of the word ‘secular’ is highly contested. It comes from the Latin *saecularis* meaning ‘an age,’ ‘a generation,’ or ‘a long time.’ This corresponds to the Greek *aeon*, meaning ‘of the times’ or ‘of the age.’ It also resonates with the German *zeitgeist* ‘spirit of the times’. In ecclesiastical Latin, secular came to mean ‘in the world’ as opposed to ‘in the church.’ According to Keane,2 the word was first used to describe non-cloistered monks who had worldly duties. This differentiation worked well as long as it was also generally understood that the church was the supreme governing agency in society. When church rule was eventually overthrown, the differentiation quickly twisted into a theological polemic—pitting the supremacy of Godly transcendence over humanity in its immanence. So, the setting up of *secular* as a mutually excluding opposite to *religious*, was a war of pedantry, confected by churchmen. A different interpretation of secular can be found in the work of

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education philosopher, John Stuart Mill, who thought “there is not a better defined word in the English language. Secular is whatever has reference to this life.”3 Literally, secularism has a broad, contemporary mission.

The secular principle does distinguish between ‘this world’ and ‘other world’ (or religious) concerns, but on the basis of polity, not theology. This differentiation was articulated by philosopher John Locke, who aimed to “distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion ... because the Church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the Commonwealth.”4 This differentiation between competing institutions contains the most common modern understanding of secular—a separation of church and state. The separation ensures that particular religious views (or anti-religious views) are not imposed by governments. The separation highlights the power play between civic and clerical functions and their different sources of authority: the democratic, or the divine.

This distinction (in the domain of governance, not beliefs) was also emphasised by Immanuel Kant, whose universal ethical theory made it clear that morality was not the same as religiosity. Consequently, Kant insisted on the removal of ecclesiastical control over education, to enable a focus on learning through reasoning.5 Baubérot's discussion of the secular principle similarly refers to the need for education’s “emancipation from all clericalism.”6

According to Smith, a secular state guarantees individual and corporate freedom of religion, deals with individual citizens irrespective of their religion, has no constitutional connection to a particular religion and does not seek to promote, or to interfere with, religion.7 At the same time, secularism cannot be reduced to anti-religiousness because: “It incorporates a moral orientation toward the world ... guided by a vision of a just society ... that should mitigate the challenges of religious pluralism.”8 The secular principle in education therefore encompasses: (1) state control and

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